WRITTEN IN A COUNTRY CHURCHYARD

BY THOMAS GRAY

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SAMPSON LOW, SON, AND MARSTON
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1869

The curfew tolls the knell of parting day.

List of Illustrations

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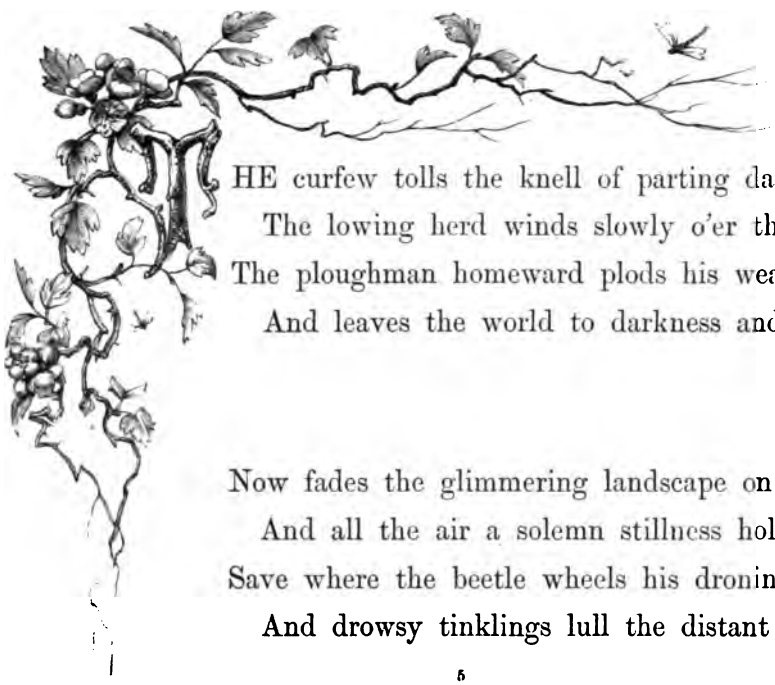
The lowing herd winds slowly o'er the lea.



THE curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
The lowing herd winds slowly o'er the lea,
The ploughman homeward plods his weary way,
And leaves the world to darkness and to me.

Now fades the glimmering landscape on the sight,
And all the air a solemn stillness holds,
Save where the beetle wheels his droning flight,
And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds:

The cock's shrill clarion.

Save that from yonder ivy-mantled tower,
  The moping owl does to the moon complain
Of such as, wandering near her secret bower,
  Molest her ancient solitary reign.

Beneath those rugged elms, that yew tree's shade,
  Where heaves the turf in many a mould'ring heap,
Each in his narrow cell for ever laid,
  The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep.

The breezy call of incense-breathing morn,
  The swallow twitt'ring from the straw-built shed,
The cock's shrill clarion, or the echoing horn,
  No more shall rouse them from their lowly bed.

Climb his knees the envied kiss to share.

Oft did the harvest to their sickle yield.

Homely joys.

For them no more the blazing hearth shall burn,
  Or busy housewife ply her evening care;
No children run to lisp their sire's return,
  Or climb his knees the envied kiss to share.

Oft did the harvest to their sickle yield,
  Their furrow oft the stubborn glebe has broke:
How jocund did they drive their team afield!
  How bow'd the woods beneath their sturdy stroke!

Let not ambition mock their useful toil,
  Their homely joys, and destiny obscure;
Nor grandeur hear with a disdainful smile
  The short and simple annals of the poor.

The paths of glory lead but to the grave.

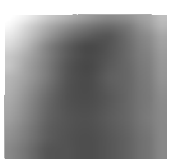
The long-drawn aisle, and fretted vault.

The boast of heraldry, the pomp of power,
And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,
Await alike th' inevitable hour.
The paths of glory lead but to the grave.

Nor you, ye proud, impute to these the fault,
If memory o'er their tomb no trophies raise,
Where through the long-drawn aisle and fretted vault,
The pealing anthem swells the note of praise.

Can storied urn, or animated bust,
Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath ?
Can honour's voice provoke the silent dust,
Or flatt'ry soothe the dull cold ear of death ?

[illegible] a glorious spot is laid.



Full many a flower is born to blush unseen.

Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid
  Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire;
Hands, that the rod of empire might have sway'd,
  Or waked to ecstasy the living lyre:

But Knowledge to their eyes her ample page
  Rich with the spoils of time did ne'er unroll;
Chill Penury repress'd their noble rage,
  And froze the genial current of the soul.

Full many a gem of purest ray serene
  The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear:
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,
  And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

Some village Hampden, that, with dauntless breast.

Some village Hampden, that, with dauntless breast,
  The little tyrant of his fields withstood,
Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest,
  Some Cromwell guiltless of his country's blood.

Th' applause of list'ning senates to command,
  The threats of pain and ruin to despise,
To scatter plenty o'er a smiling land,
  And read their history in a nation's eyes.

Their lot forbade: nor circumscribed alone
  Their growing virtues, but their crimes confined;
Forbade to wade thro' slaughter to a throne,
  And shut the gates of mercy on mankind,

Along the cool sequestered vale of life.

The struggling pangs of conscious truth to hide,
  To quench the blushes of ingenuous shame,
Or heap the shrine of luxury and pride
  With incense kindled at the Muse's flame.

Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife,
  Their sober wishes never learn'd to stray;
Along the cool sequester'd vale of life
  They kept the noiseless tenor of their way.

Yet e'en these bones from insult to protect
  Some frail memorial still erected nigh,
With uncouth rhymes and shapeless sculpture deck'd,
  Implores the passing tribute of a sigh.

On some fond breast the parting soul relies.

Their name, their years, spelt by th' unletter'd Muse,
  The place of fame and elegy supply:
And many a holy text around she strews,
  That teach the rustic moralist to die.

For who, to dumb forgetfulness a prey,
  This pleasing anxious being e'er resign'd,
Left the warm precincts of the cheerful day,
  Nor cast one longing ling'ring look behind?

On some fond breast the parting soul relies,
  Some pious drops the closing eye requires;
E'en from the tomb the voice of nature cries,
  E'en in our ashes live their wonted fires.

There at the foot of yonder nodding beech.

For thee, who, mindful of th' unhonour'd Dead,
  Dost in these lines their artless tale relate;
If chance, by lonely contemplation led,
  Some kindred spirit shall enquire thy fate,—

Haply some hoary-headed swain may say,
  "Oft have we seen him at the peep of dawn,
Brushing with hasty steps the dews away,
  To meet the sun upon the upland lawn:

"There at the foot of yonder nodding beech,
  That wreathes its old fantastic roots so high,
His listless length at noontide would he stretch,
  And pore upon the brook that babbles by.

Slow through the church-way path we saw it borne.

"Hard by yon wood, now smiling as in scorn,
Mutt'ring his wayward fancies he would rove;
Now drooping, woful-wan, like one forlorn,
Or crazed with care, or cross'd in hopeless love.

"One morn I miss'd him on th' accustom'd hill,
Along the heath, and near his fav'rite tree;
Another came; nor yet beside the rill,
Nor up the lawn, nor at the wood was he:

"The next, with dirges due in sad array,
Slow through the church-way path we saw him borne;
Approach and read (for thou canst read) the lay
Grav'd on the stone beneath yon aged thorn."

The Epitaph.

Here rests his head upon the lap of earth
A youth, to fortune and to fame unknown:
Fair Science frown'd not on his humble birth,
And Melancholy mark'd him for her own.

Large was his bounty, and his soul sincere,
Heaven did a recompense as largely send:
He gave to misery (all he had) a tear,
He gain'd from heaven ('twas all he wish'd) a friend.

No farther seek his merits to disclose,
Or draw his frailties from their dread abode,
(There they alike in trembling hope repose,)
The bosom of his Father and his God.

The manuscript from which the present Facsimile has been taken, is the only existing draught of the Poem, the Autograph at Pembroke House, Cambridge, being manifestly a fair copy made by the Poet, probably for circulation among his friends. This draught formed a portion of the papers bequeathed by Gray to his friend and biographer, Mason.

Stanza's wrote in a Country Church-Yard.

The Curfew tolls the Knell of parting Day,
The lowing Herd wind slowly o'er the Lea,
The Plowman homeward plods his weary Way,
And leaves the World to Darkness & to me.

Now fades the glimmering Landscape on the Sight,
And now the Air a solemn Stillness holds;
Save, where the Beetle wheels his droning Flight,
Or drowsy Tinklings lull the distant Folds.

Save, that from yonder ivy-mantled Tower
The mopeing Owl does to the Moon complain
Of such, as stray or wandring near her secret Bower
Molest her ancient solitary Reign.

Beneath those rugged Elms, that Yewtree's Shade,
Where heaves the Turf in many a mouldring Heap,
Each in his narrow Cell for ever laid
The rude Forefathers of the Hamlet sleep.

For ever sleep the breezy Call of Horn,
Or Swallow twittering from the strawbuilt Shed,
Or Chanticleer's shrill or echoing Horn,
No more shall rouse them from their lowly Bed.

For them no more the blazeing Hearth shall burn,
Or busy Housewife ply her Evening Care;
No Children run to lisp their Sire's Return,
Nor climb his Knees the envied kiss to share. doubtful

Oft did the Harvest to their Sickle yield;
Their Furrow oft the stubborn Glebe has broke;
How jocund did they drive their Team a-field!
How bow'd the Woods beneath their sturdy Stroke!

Let not Ambition mock their useful Toil homely
Their rustic Joys & Destiny obscure:
Nor Grandeur hear with a disdainful Smile
The short & simple Annals of the Poor.

The Boast of Heraldry the Pomp of Power,
And all that Beauty, all that Wealth, e'er gave
Awaits alike th' inevitable Hour.
The Paths of Glory lead but to the Grave.

Forgive, ye Proud, th' involuntary Fault,
If Memory o'er these no Trophies raise,
Where thro' the long-drawn Aisle, & fretted Vault
The pealing Anthem swells the Note of Praise.

Can storied Urn, or animated Bust,
Back to its Mansion call the fleeting Breath?
Can Honour's Voice ~~awake~~ provoke the silent Dust,
Or Flattery soothe the dull cold Ear of Death?

1. Perhaps in this neglected Spot is laid
Some Heart, once pregnant with celestial Fire,
Hands, that the Reins of Empire might have sway'd,
Or waked to Ecstasy the living Lyre:

7. Some Village Hampden, with dauntless Breast
The little Tyrant of his Fields withstood;
Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest;
Some Cæsar, guiltless of his Country's Blood.

2. But Knowledge to their Eyes her ample Page,
Rich with the Spoils of Time, did ne'er unroll:
Chill Penury had ~~damp'd~~ repressed their noble Rage,
And froze the genial Current of the Soul.

3. Full many a Gem of purest Ray serene
The dark unfathom'd Caves of Ocean bear!
Full many a Flower is born to blush unseen
And waste its Sweetness on the ~~desert~~ Air.

Th' Applause of listening Senates to command,
The Threats of Pain & Ruin to despise,
To scatter Plenty o'er a smiling Land
And read their History in a Nation's Eyes,

Their Lot forbad: nor circumscribed alone
Their growing ~~struggling~~ Virtues but their Crimes confined;
Forbid to wade thro' Slaughter to a Throne,
And shut the Gates of Mercy on Mankind

The struggling Pangs of conscious Truth to hide,
To quench the Blushes of ingenuous Shame,
And crown with Incense hallow'd kindled at the Muse's Flame.
The thoughtless World to Majesty may bow
Exult the brave, & idolize Success
But more to Innocence, their Safety owe,
Than Power & Genius e'er conspired to bless.
And thou, who mindful of the unhonour'd Dead
Dost in these Notes thy artless Tale relate
By Night & lonely Contemplation led
To linger in the gloomy Walks of Fate.
Hark how the sacred Calm that broods around
Bids every fierce tumultuous Passion cease
In still small Accents whispering from the Ground
A grateful Earnest of eternal Peace.
No more with Reason & thyself at Strife
Give anxious Cares & endless Wishes room
But thro' the cool sequester'd Vale of Life
Pursue the silent Tenour of the Doom.

Far from the madding Crowd's ignoble Strife;
Their sober Wishes never knew to stray:
Along the cool sequester'd Vale of Life
They kept the silent Tenour of their Way.

Yet even these Bones from Insult to protect
Some frail Memorial still erected nigh
With uncouth Rhime, & shapeless Sculpture decat
Implores the passing Tribute of a Sigh.
Their Name, their Years, spelt by the unlettered Muse
The Place of Fame, & Epitaph shall save
And many a holy Text around she strews
That teach the rustic Moralist to die.
For who to dumb Forgetfulness a Prey
This pleasing anxious Being e'er resign'd;
Left the warm Precincts of the cheerful Day,
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~~Warm~~ With Incense hallow'd kindled at in the Muse's Flame.

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This pleasing anxious Being e'er resign'd;
Left the warm Precincts of the cheerful Day;
Nor cast one longing lingering Look behind?

On some fond Breast the parting Soul relies,
Some pious Drops the closing Eye requires:
Even from the Tomb, the Voice of Nature cries,
And buried Ashes glow with social Fires
For Thee, who mindful be: as above.

If chance, that e'er some pensive Spirit more,
By sympathetic Musings here delay'd,
With vain, tho' kind, Enquiry shall explore
Thy once-loved Haunt, this long-deserted Shade.
Haply some hoary-headed Swain shall say,
Oft have we seen him at the Peep of Dawn
With hasty Footsteps brush the Dews away
On the high Brow of yonder hanging Lawn
Him have we seen the Green-wood Side along,
While o'er the Heath we hied, our Labours done,
Oft as the Woodlark piped her farewell Song
With whistful Eyes pursue the setting Sun
Oft, at the Foot of yonder spreading hoary Beech nodding
That wreathes its old fantastic Roots so high.

His listless Length at Noontide would he stretch,
And pore upon the Brook that babbles by.
With Gestures quaint now smiling at in Scorn,
Mutt'ring his fond Conceits he ~~would~~ would he rove:
Now wrapt in fancies ~~would he rove~~
Now woeful wan, he droop'd, as one forlorn,
Or crazed with Care, or cross'd in hopeless Love.
One Morn we miss'd him on th' accustom'd Hill,
Along the Heath-side, & near his fav'rite Tree
Another came, nor yet beside the Rill,
Nor up the Lawn, nor at the Wood was he.
~~There scatter'd oft, the earliest~~
The next with Dirges meet, in sad Array
Slow thro' the Church-way Path we saw him borne.
Approach & read, for thou can'st read the Lay
Graved on the Stone beneath that ancient Thorn
There scatter'd oft the earliest of the ~~Tears~~
By Hands unseen are frequent Showers of Violets found
The Robin loves to build & warble there
And little Footsteps lightly print the Ground.

No farther seek his Merits to disclose,
Nor draw his frailties from their dread Abode
(There they alike in trembling Hope repose)
The Bosom of his Father & his God.

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